

M A N D I O C A

Mandioca is a plant generally called in English Manioc, or Cassava. The name is from the Tupi Indian language. Its large, starchy rootstocks are an important source of food in Brazil, and in tropical countries generally. Tapioca, one of the products of this plant, is to be found in almost every American kitchen.

The plant itself is interesting. It looks like a bush, growing to a height of five or six feet. The leaves are palmately compound, and closely resemble those of our woodbine. The stems are only partially woody, and contain a good deal of starch, and are sometimes used for feeding cattle. Also, the stems are the part used for planting the mandioca. After digging up the roots, the stems are piled in convenient piles, and planting, which may be done right after harvest, or at almost any time of the year, is done by digging holes with a hoe, about as far apart as corn is planted, and in each hole placing a piece of the stem about a foot long, and covering it with earth, except one end that is left uncovered, so that one of the joints is exposed. The joints underground will sprout roots, and the one above ground will send out a leaf bud, and finally a new plant will grow from this. Mandioca will stand more dry weather than almost any other crop, and remains beautifully green when the other fields are brown and sere. It is the best crop for poor soil, for while in good soil it makes a bountiful crop quickly, still in the poorest soil it hardly ever makes a total failure. If at the end of one season it has made nothing, you simply leave it growing, and at the end of the second, or at most of the third season, it will surely have something worth digging up.

The roots look a little like sweet potatoes, and vary a good deal in size and shape. A root two feet long, with a maximum diameter of four inches, is a very nice one, but by no means exceptional. After being dug, the roots are loaded on ox carts and taken to the casa de farinha, the little neighborhood mill where they are processed by home methods, and made into the Brazilian staff of life.

The odd thing about these roots is that they contain a deadly poison, hydrocyanic acid, which is present in the juice. Somewhere in human history some adventurous

soul discovered that if only the juice were thoroughly removed, the starchy part of the root would be good for food. The juice is first pressed out, and then the remainder removed by drying over a gentle heat.

The first step is to peel the roots, after which they must be grated. The grating is done by means of a burr, which is made by driving nails thickly into a wooden hub, then filing off the heads and making sharp points. This burr is made to revolve rapidly by a pulley and belt from a larger wheel, turned by a hand crank. The peeled root is pressed against the revolving burr until completely grated. The grated mass is then placed in the press, which is usually made of a hollowed out log, and covered with a mat woven of the leaves of the ouricuri palm. The press machinery is actuated by a screw hand carved from hard wood, and turned by man power, handspikes being inserted into a vessel, whence it is poured in conveniently spaced holes for turning the screw. The juice runs out/on the ground, but until such time as it disappears in the earth it is carefully guarded, lest any cow, or other animal, should drink it, as it would be fatal, even in small quantity.

After pressing out the juice as thoroughly as possible, the mass is transferred to the drying oven. This is not properly an oven, but a structure of brick and cement, circular in form, and standing about three feet high, with a smooth cement surface on top, surrounded by a ledge six or eight inches in height. The furnace is underneath, with a chimney of course, for draught and for carrying off the smoke; and the mass is spread on the cement surface, and stirred constantly until perfectly dry, and partially cooked. Having been reduced to granular form by grating, it emerges as a sort of meal, white, but not of a snowy whiteness, and somewhat resembling corn meal, but much coarser. This is the farinha (pronounced fa-reen-ya), of which much has been said and written. Unkind critics have likened it to sawdust, and denounced it as tasteless; but by the same token, many people find dry bread tasteless. Really, dry bread has a good flavor, and so has farinha; and farinha, like bread, is at its best eaten along with other foods.

In the process of extracting the juice from the roots, there appears in the juice a white substance, which settles to the bottom, and is carefully separated and saved before throwing out the juice. This is called goma, and is an excellent natural laundry starch.

There are many ways of eating farinha. The simplest way is to eat it dry. I have seen workmen eating their noonday lunch, which consisted of nothing but a little bag of farinha, which they sat and ate with apparent enjoyment. They used no spoon, but would take up a generous pinch with the thumb and three fingers, and with a quick movement project it into the mouth, seeming never to miss a grain. But what is considered a real substantial meal for a hard working man is salt dried meat, roasted or fried, and rolled in farinha before eating. The meat not only goes farther when eaten with the farinha, but is better. In almost every Brazilian home there will be on the table at the midday meal a dish of farinha. In hotels and boarding houses this often takes the convenient form of a quart bottle, filled with farinha, from which it may easily be poured onto the plate. Feijão (beans) is one of the principal dishes, and this is not complete without farinha, which soaks up the "pot liquor", and gives body to the whole. But whatever is on his plate, the Brazilian generally feels that the whole thing, rice, feijão, meat, gravy, vegetables, is improved by pouring a generous quantity of farinha on top of it all, and mixing it in.

Farinha may be used in making various other dishes, perhaps the commonest being farofia. This is made in various ways, and takes various forms, but one of the best ways is this: Take the amount of farinha desired, say two cups, and put it in a shallow pan, and toast until golden brown. This may be done in the oven, stirring from time to time, or on top of the stove, stirring more frequently. In a skillet melt some butter, about two tablespoons to each cup of farinha. Cut finely a medium sized onion, and brown lightly in the butter, then pour the whole over the toasted farinha, stirring thoroughly. The farinha will not thicken, as flour would do, but retains its granular form. Then chop finely two to four hard boiled eggs, and mix in thoroughly, and salt to taste, and your farofia is ready -- and good, too.

Farinha forms one of the principal elements in the dressing used to stuff a fowl; but besides this, when cooking any meat with a good deal of fat, as pork, or a fat chicken, the excess fat is separated and mixed with farinha, then cooked until the mass thickens and is "done". This is called pirão, and while naturally very greasy, it is quite good.

Tapioca (o pronounced like aw) is another product of farinha, but it does not mean what we understand by the word in North America. Tapioca is a sort of pancake, perfectly white, the under side smooth, and the upper side granular in appearance. After cooking it is folded, and the edges pressed together so as to make them adhere, leaving the smooth side out. They are very commonly sold in the market on market days, but I cannot remember ever seeing, or at least watching, the process of making them. In texture, tapioca is "chewy". It is not sweet, and at first essay seems almost tasteless; but it really has a delicate flavor that is very agreeable when you get used to it.

What we in North America call tapioca is also known in Brazil, and called by various local names. In Pernambuco it is generally called farinha de Maranhão, the last name being the name of one of the states of Brazil, located northwest of Pernambuco. However, it is not the smoothly finished product we buy in packages at the grocer's, but is made of irregular, roughly broken up grains, about as large as buckshot. In this form it requires longer cooking, but the flavor is about the same.

Without going through the process of making farinha, the mandioca roots may be used to make bolo, pé de moleque (nigger foot cake). The roots are placed in a large earthenware jar, covered with water, and allowed to soak for several days. This removes the bulk of the poisonous juice. They they are grated by hand, and washed again, and then they may safely be used, as any additional poison will pass off in the cooking. I do not know the recipe for making this cake, often as I have eaten it. It is not properly a cake, more like a heavy pudding, and is considered rather plain fare. One has a feeling that it would not be safe to go swimming after eating very much of it.

Macacheira is really a variety of mandioca. I think it is called sweet cassava in English speaking countries, not because it is sweet, which it is not, but because it is not poisonous, and may be eaten as a vegetable. The plant may be hard for an inexperienced observer to distinguish from the mandioca plant, but it is smaller when mature, and the roots are generally smaller than those of mandioca. The macacheira roots may be boiled, and eaten with butter, like potatoes, which they closely resemble in texture and flavor. There is a central woody fiber in each root, but it is easily removed at table by opening the root with a knife.

In January, 1948 I was making a trip with my family that took me off the main traveled highway. Not far from the town of Jurema we passed a farmhouse where there was a casa de farinha where the people were working; and as the children had been begging for water we decided to stop and get some water, and watch their work for a little while. They brought us water from a seeping spring nearby, very milky in appearance, but not bad in taste. The people were very friendly and hospitable, as Brazilians almost always are, and were glad to show us how the process was carried out. It was the first day of the season, and they had not yet begun to bake the farinha. But all the numerous family were at work -- old grandparents, men, women, and children of all sizes. One was firing up the furnace, another, with cement, was patching the cracks in the baking oven that had appeared since last year's use; some were peeling the roots, one was turning the wheel, another was grating the peeled roots, others carried the grated mass to and from the press, while the father of the family worked the press, and a woman was busy recovering the goma from the pressed out juice. Two boys were busy at the variant operation of cutting up cactus to feed cattle; and the roof of the open shed that covered all the machinery for making farinha was hung throughout with corn in the shuck, and with drying leaves of tobacco. Never have I seen such a picture of thrift and industry and happy toil; and it centered, as much of the rural life of Brazil does, around mandioca.